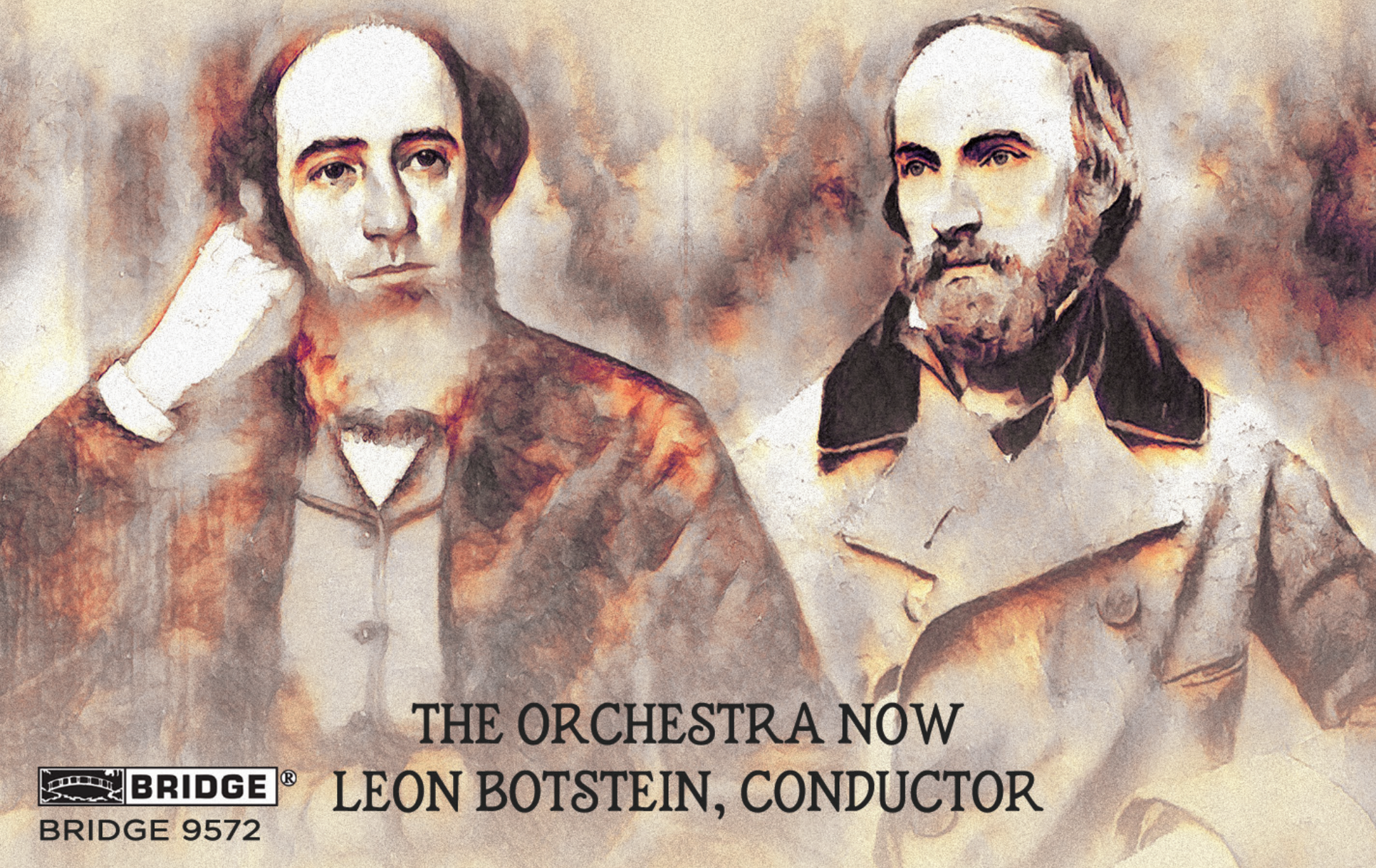
CLASSICS OF AMERICAN ROMANTICISM

GEORGE FREDERICK BRISTOW

Symphony No. 4 "Arcadian"

WILLIAM HENRY FRY

Niagara Symphony



THE ORCHESTRA NOW

LEON BOTSTEIN, CONDUCTOR

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GEORGE FREDERICK BRISTOW

(1825-1898)

Symphony No. 4 "Arcadian" (42:29)

1) I. "Emigrants' Journey Across the Plains" (15:47)

2) II. "Halt on the Prairie" (10:36)

3) III. "Indian War Dance and Attack by Indians" (5:34)

4) IV. "Arrival at the New Home, Rustic Festivities, and Dancing" (10:21)

WILLIAM HENRY FRY

(1813-1864)

5) Niagara Symphony (12:31)

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The "Arcadian" and the "Niagara" Symphonies

William Henry Fry (1813-1864) and **George Frederick Bristow** (1825-1898) constituted the first generation of major, native-born composers of instrumental music in the United States. Fry, son of a prominent Philadelphia publisher, became a music critic and foreign correspondent as well as a composer. Bristow, son of a violinist, was trained on that instrument from childhood, entered the violin section of the fledgling New York Philharmonic soon after its formation, and later became New York City's most prominent conductor. Neither studied in Europe, and both became fierce proponents of American music; Fry, more irascible and outspoken, initiated a war of letters with other music critics, into which his more reticent younger protégé was irresistibly drawn. Spurred on by his mentor, Bristow made the most famous gesture of his life in 1854: he quit the Philharmonic for 18 months in protest against the German-dominated orchestra's failure to live up to their stated mission to encourage the performance of works by American composers.

Fry wrote seven symphonies in all, of which only two have been recorded, and Bristow wrote five, of which the middle three have been recorded. However, Bristow's Fourth Symphony, the "Arcadian," is recorded here

in its entirety for the first time; a 1967 recording by Karl Krueger with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra made large cuts in the first and last movements, reducing its length by at least ten minutes. The Fry symphony here is his Niagara Symphony, and Bristow's Fifth is also subtitled "Niagara," with a chorus in the final movement on the pattern of Beethoven's Ninth. Lacking any modern experience of Bristow's Niagara, the Arcadian is, in this writer's opinion, perhaps the best American symphony written before Charles Ives's First – the Second Symphony of John Knowles Paine being its closest competitor.

The Arcadian Symphony resulted from a commission by the Brooklyn Philharmonic (of which Bristow was also a founding member), which offered him a rather paltry sum of one hundred dollars. Rather than write a new work for that pittance, he took the first three instrumental movements of a cantata he had written called The Pioneer, added a well-fitting final movement, and named it the Arcadian. Unlike Fry, Anthony Philip Heinrich, and Moreau Gottschalk, who attempted to develop an American style, Bristow drew on the Germanic idiom, but based his programmatic music on American topics. The Arcadian was meant to roughly depict the American settlers' journeys across the continent to new lands in the West. This is most evident in the unusual device of opening with a solo viola, depicting the lone pioneer starting out on his own.

The four movements are titled “Emigrants’ Journey Across the Plains”; “Halt on the Prairie”; “Indian War Dance and Attack by Indians”; and “Arrival at the New Home, Rustic Festivities, and Dancing.” The first movement, in 3/4 meter, owes much to Beethoven’s Eroica in its pounding chordal sonorities, and in general the derivation of every theme in the work from pairs of half-steps seems to be evidence that Bristow had closely studied Beethoven’s Op. 131 String Quartet in C-sharp minor. After the unaccompanied viola plays the main theme, the orchestra enters with a continuation, which quickly gives way to pounding chords. The second theme is gently pastoral, and Bristow transitions into and out of it gradually. Given how harshly American composers of the time were judged by European standards, the risks he takes are breathtaking; the solo viola returns twice more (at the beginning of the recapitulation and in the final coda), the second theme is anticipated in the distant key of C-sharp major before fully appearing in the expected G major, and in the middle of the recap, 72 measures of ecstatic melody appear that hadn’t been heard before.

The slow second movement may be the highlight. After a moody horn melody, the lower brass play a straightforward quartet version of “Tallis’s Evening Hymn” (“All praise to Thee, my God, this night”), a hymn which was popular in 19th century America; this clearly represents the im-

migrants' singing a prayer before or after their evening meal. The second theme goes into 12/8 meter, and ends in an almost Brahmsian climax based on the Tallis hymn's opening notes. In the second half, the Tallis hymn returns in the horn, but this time, over a delicate accompaniment by pizzicato strings, high above, the violins spin a wide-ranging line in virtuosic triplet 16th notes. The atmosphere could not be more transformed - it is as though the unadorned, homespun hymn came back accompanied by fireworks and fireflies.

The scherzo, "Indian War Dance," is perhaps unfortunate in its ham-fisted stereotype of tribal dances, revealing 19th century mainstream U.S. attitudes towards indigenous peoples. The main interest is in the second A section of its ABA form, where the drums pound louder indicating a battle, and Bristow draws some developmental key changes making it clear where the tide of battle turns in the settlers' favor. The finale is a rollicking sonata form in 6/8 meter. The opening motive transposes easily though different keys, but, for all the noisiness, the gentle second theme whirls through a variety of distant keys with graceful ease, and there are moments of Mendelssohnian delicacy. The final coda, however, is long and rambunctious, ending climactically in major-minor ambiguity.

Bristow's strength lies not in his thematic material, which is unexceptional, but in that he was a born sonata-allegro composer. He can expertly modulate within a theme, even signal to the listener whether the modulation is only momentary or more structural, and he can delay a definitive cadence with the best of Wagnerians. He doesn't like so much to develop motives as to repeat themes and bend them, often exquisitely, to different purposes each time. One of his quirks is that he repeats so much of his high-profile expositional material in the development section that (in the first and last movements) by the time the recap has passed one has heard everything three times. Yet he seems to be the rare composer who writes more comfortably in sonata form than in simpler genres.

As for Fry, he was a great believer in Italianate opera as a stylistic source for the symphony. Following the failure of some operatic projects, he tested out his theories in seven symphonies written in the 1850s, including the Santa Claus symphony, one on Byron's Childe Harold, and a sacred symphony on Hagar in the wilderness. The fifth of these was the Niagara Symphony (1854), surely one of the most avant-garde works of the 19th century. Along with tubas, ophicleides (bass horns), and bombardones (bass tubas), the piece is scored for no fewer than eleven timpani, one for every pitch in the scale except F. While tone poems were becoming popular in Europe at this

time, it was perhaps unprecedented for Fry to attempt an onomatopoetic imitation of a natural sound, the magnificent roar of Niagara Falls, which any visitor to the site will recall being ominously audible for miles around. (Of course, at this same time, every American landscape painter seemed to feel it necessary to attempt to commit this sublime subject to canvas.)

The use of three flats in the key signature is a mystery, since neither the keys E-flat major nor C minor are much in evidence. The piece, a simple ABA form with the more melodic portion in the middle, opens pianissimo with four timpani rolling the most dissonant chord in the 19th century vocabulary, a diminished seventh chord. In constant crescendo, the strings, horns, and brass build up through changing chords to a grand fanfare, in the unison winds and brass, spelling out the C-major triad, as a symbol of the simple majesty of nature. Falling diminished seventh chords reflect the falling water, after which long waves in chromatic scales flow up and down in rolling 32nd notes for many measures, so true to the sound they depict that you could almost guess this was the roar of Niagara without knowing it. Once these die away, the entire orchestra joins in a pastoral chorus in A-flat major. Rising arpeggios lead back to a recapitulation of the opening section, which dies away on the same diminished-seventh chord with which it opened: surely no other known 19th century work ended on so dissonant and inconclusive a sonority.

By the 1880s, a new generation of composers – Amy Beach, Paine, and George Whitefield Chadwick, the latter two trained in Germany – offered an updated musical style and a more academic European polish. Fry and Bristow were forgotten, and while nearly all 19th century American classical music (Gottschalk excepted) languishes in obscurity, their music has waited longest for a revival. But they originated, with flair and daring, our national symphonic tradition, and our musical heritage is an incomplete picture without them. — *Kyle Gann*

Kyle Gann (b. 1955 in Dallas, Texas) is a composer and the author of seven books on American music, including books on microtonality, Charles Ives's *Concord Sonata*, John Cage's *4'33"*, Conlon Nancarrow, and Robert Ashley. He studied composition with Ben Johnston, Morton Feldman, and Peter Gena, and about a fourth of his music is microtonal. His major works include the piano concerto *Sunken City*, *Transcendental Sonnets* for chorus and orchestra, the microtonal music theater piece *Custer and Sitting Bull*, *The Planets* for mixed octet, and *Hyperchromatica* for three retuned, computer-driven pianos. His music is available on the New Albion, New World, Cold Blue, Lovely Music, Mode, Other Minds, Meyer Media, Innova, New Tone, Microfest, Vous Ne Revez Pas Encore, Brilliant Classics, and Monroe Street labels.

Leon Botstein brings a renowned career as both a conductor and educator to his role as music director of The Orchestra Now. He has been music director of the American Symphony Orchestra since 1992, artistic codirector of Bard SummerScape and the Bard Music Festival since their creation, and president of Bard College since 1975. He was the music director of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra from 2003–11, and is now conductor laureate. In 2018 he assumed artistic directorship of the Grafenegg Academy in Austria. Mr. Botstein is also a frequent guest conductor with orchestras around the globe, has made numerous recordings, and is a prolific author and music historian. He is the editor of the prestigious *The Musical Quarterly*, and has received many honors for his contributions to music.

More information online at leonbotstein.com.

The Orchestra Now (TŌN) is a group of vibrant young musicians from across the globe who are making orchestral music relevant to 21st century audiences by sharing their unique personal insights in a welcoming environment. Hand-picked from the world's leading conservatories—including the Yale School of Music, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, Royal Academy of Music, and the Eastman School of Music—the members of TŌN are enlightening curious minds by giving on-stage introductions and demonstrations, writing concert notes from the musicians' perspective, and having one-on-one discussions with patrons during intermissions.

Conductor, educator, and music historian Leon Botstein, whom *The New York Times* said "draws rich, expressive playing from the orchestra," founded TŌN in 2015 as a graduate program at Bard College, where he is also president. TŌN offers both a three-year master's degree in Curatorial, Critical, and Performance Studies and a two-year advanced certificate in Orchestra Studies. The orchestra's home base is the Frank Gehry-designed Fisher Center at Bard, where it performs multiple concerts each season and takes part in the annual Bard Music Festival. It also performs regularly at the finest venues in New York, including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and others across NYC and beyond. *HuffPost*, who has called TŌN's performances "dramatic and intense," praises these concerts as "an opportunity to see talented musicians early in their careers."

The orchestra has performed with many distinguished guest conductors and soloists, including Leonard Slatkin, Neeme Järvi, Gil Shaham, Fabio Luisi, Vadim Repin, Hans Graf, Peter Serkin, Gerard Schwarz, Tan Dun, and JoAnn Falletta. Recordings featuring The Orchestra Now include two albums of piano concertos with Piers Lane on Hyperion Records, and a Sorel Classics concert recording of pianist Anna Shelest performing works by Anton Rubinstein with TŌN and conductor Neeme Järvi. *Buried Alive* with baritone Michael Nagy, released on Bridge Records in August 2020, includes the first recording in almost 60 years—and only the second recording ever—of Othmar Schoeck's song-cycle *Lebendig begraben*. Recent releases include an album of piano concertos with Orion Weiss on Bridge Records, and the soundtrack to the motion picture Forte. Recordings of TŌN's live concerts from the Fisher Center can be heard on Classical WMHT-FM and WWFM The Classical Network, and are featured regularly on *Performance Today*, broadcast nationwide.

Explore upcoming concerts, see what our musicians have to say, and find out more information on the academic program at ton.bard.edu.

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[1] *Bristow*
[2] *Fry*

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